

empires

empire

a public work by Douglas Gordon

commissioned by Visual Art Projects for the Merchant City Civic Society

It's like a scene in a movie -- with Douglas Gordon it's always a scene in a movie. Night has fallen in Los Angeles, there is a new moon visible through high clouds and the air is crisp. It's quiet, with only the hushed hum of distant traffic, and maybe an occasional dog. The camera moves down a dark street, past shadowy houses, and then turns up a driveway into a backyard. The door of a large garage is open and reveals a brightly lit painter's studio, a large, unfinished painting on the back wall. A man sits at a desk in front of a computer screen, typing. A fax comes in, from Douglas. It's headed with an address in Berlin, but he says he's in Glasgow where it's pissing rain and blowing a gale. He wants to know where the essay is. The man drops the fax in a waste bucket and returns his attention to the computer, to send an email to his collaborator: tlawson@muse.calarts.edu to moarf@earthlink.net.

In a windowless downtown office at the end of the day a man slumps at his desk. Time to check the mail again. He logs on. A message from [tlawson](mailto:tlawson@muse.calarts.edu): subject: Douglas Gordon: Empire. It's the beginning of an exchange. With Douglas there is always an exchange, always two sides to the story, always an image and always a mirror image. Often there is good and evil, although it is not always clear which is which. Tom and I, of course, are both good (mostly) and both Scottish emigres.

A few days before Christmas a package arrived, FedEx from the Lisson Gallery in London. On the customs declaration it said, "Video: not pornography." Disappointed, I put it aside for a while. Today I took it up to CalArts to watch what I actually knew to be Douglas's proposal for a public work on Brunswick Lane in Glasgow. It's a nice work in itself, a dream-like deconstruction of a scene from *Vertigo*.

In dreams identities are fluid. People we thought we know pass constantly into others. This dream-like state is the psychic territory in which the apparently realistic film *Vertigo* takes place. Dream or nightmare? For Douglas Gordon the two are inseparable, like the free-standing film screen he erected in Munster last summer that showed *Song of Bernadette* and *The Exorcist* at the same time, projected from either side of the screen. The saintly young girl and the Satanically possessed adolescent constantly overlapped each other as priests and nuns passed back and forth across them, wrestling for their souls, and the sound of unearthly screams blended with angelic hymns.

The scene begins with Jimmy Stewart walking down a city street towards the camera. He's nattily dressed and seems nervously watchful, maybe even shifty. A number of cars pass, seeming to float. It is then you realise that the film has been slowed down, in the Douglas Gordon manner. Stewart stops and watches a woman walking down the other side of the street. The slow motion makes his stalking of Kim Novak seem creepier than it does in the movie. She enters a nondescript building with an awning jutting out over the pavement. The camera, taking Stewart's point of view, does a slow pan up the facade, caressing a vertical sign that reads, "EMPIRE HOTEL." Novak comes to a window, opens it and turns back inside. We then see a short take of the hotel front at night, followed by the original scene again, flipped so that Stewart seems to be coming down the street from the other end.

Everything can be reversed in Douglas's art, and often is. The flipping backwards and forwards is relentless. Even although the pace of the action is often glacially slow, the process of reversal, of constant turning back and beginning again from the other side, never stops. The tension is always mounting. *Vertigo* is just beyond the horizon, or just around the next corner.

Douglas's idea is to take this hotel sign and use it as the basis of a work that would almost blend unnoticed into the streetscape of the city. A vertical neon sign, green light outlining white letters on black, is to be attached high on a wall against a strip of mirror plate. The letters spell the word EMPIRE, but they are reversed, so that the word will seem slightly wrong in the real space of the sign, and clearly legible in the reflective space of the mirror. The lighting around one of the letters is to appear broken, so that it's blinking will attract passersby on Argyle Street to walk into the lane.

Here in America, thousands of miles away from a rainy alley in Glasgow, Empire takes on a faintly nostalgic quality, heightened by the old-fashioned lettering and the broken, flashing, letter. Even the neon itself seems from another time, as indeed it is: it's from 1958, when Alfred Hitchcock made his film. The word suggests something Victorian. And we all know now that it is the American empire that dominates the world. American tourists come to Scotland and find it "quaint." I like the idea of this (brand-new) old American sign hiding out in Brunswick Lane, buzzing and flashing, slightly disorienting with its reversed lettering and the mirrored surface that (almost) returns it to normal.

Douglas told me that when he first made a presentation of the project at the Mitre Bar a few of the locals questioned the use of the word 'empire'; someone suggested that 'tobacco' might be a better option. Douglas thought that this was positive evidence that his work was going to have strong reverberation with the people of Glasgow, and imagined all sorts of discussion around the legacy of Scottish Mercantilism and the British Empire but then someone mentioned to him that it might be more to do with some memories of the Empire Theatre; some locals mourning it's loss, others remembering hating the shows it put on.

After a couple of drinks on a Saturday, the Empire belongs to me.

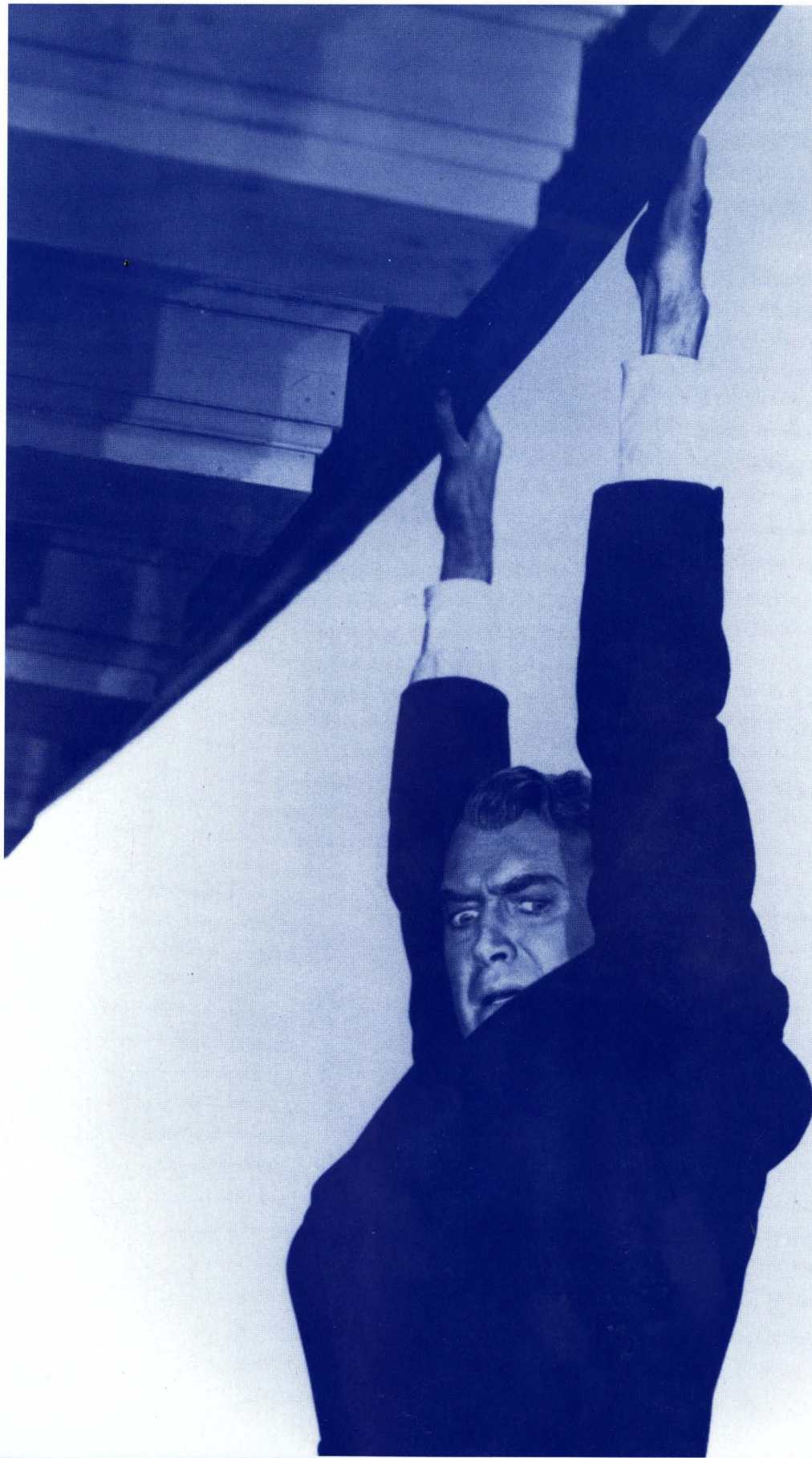
Text: Thomas Lawson & Russell Ferguson



Thomas Lawson is an artist living and working in Los Angeles, where he is currently Dean of the Art School at CalArts.

Russell Ferguson is an associate curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Photograph by Simon Starling



James Stewart, 'Vertigo', 1958 (Alfred Hitchcock/Universal Studios)

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